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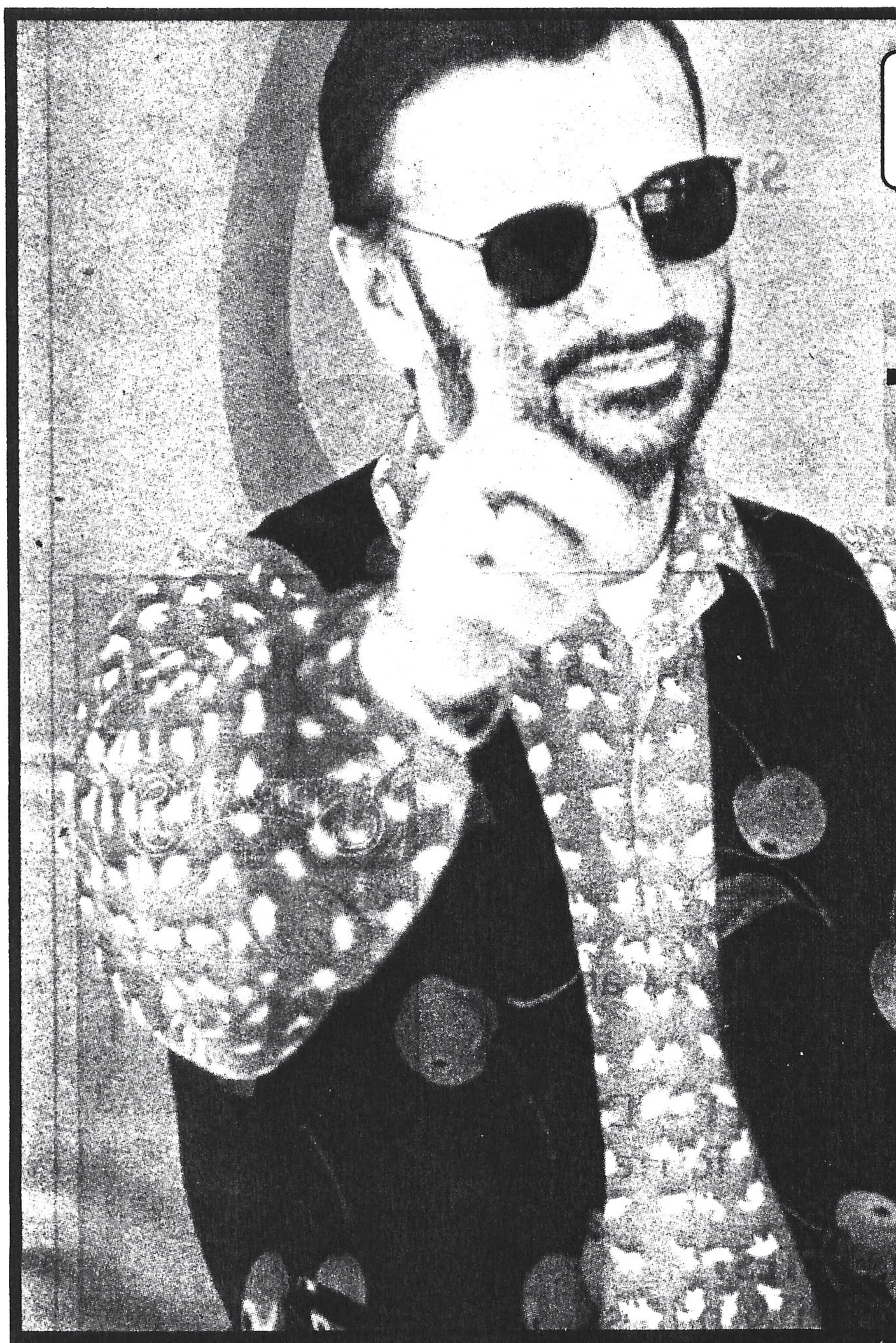

RINGO STARR

TIME TAKES TIME

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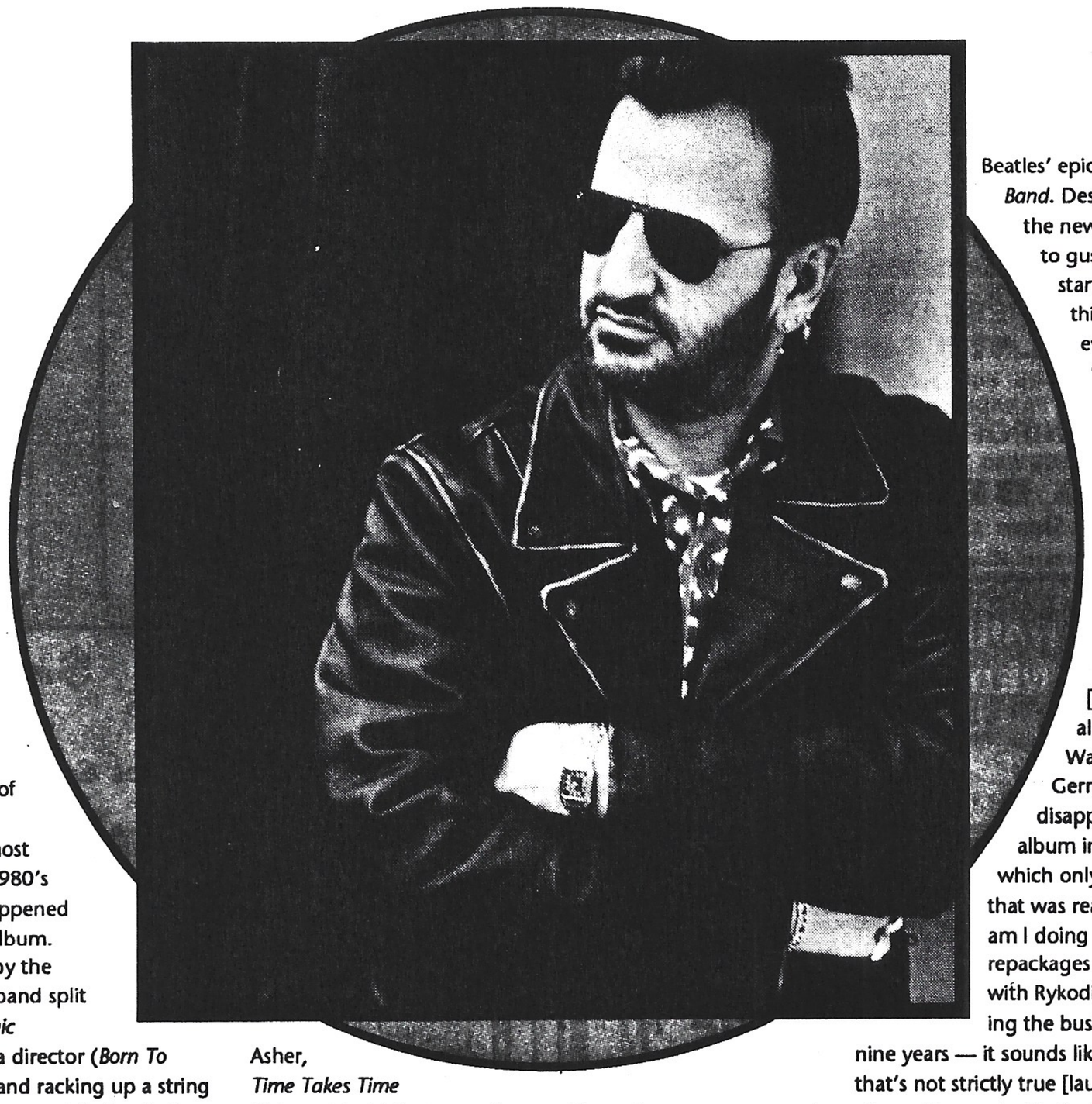
RINGO STARR

TIME TAKES TIME

By Danny McCue



"Good Morning, Danny," says Ringo Starr, on the phone from Los Angeles.

" ...or it may be afternoon for you — I'm not too sure anymore."

The next thing I hear is the sound of Ringo Starr laughing.

For the affable and, at one time, most successful of the former Beatles, the 1980's were kind of the 'funny' thing that happened on the way to making his latest solo album.

He was the Beatle least burdened by the heavy legacy that remained after the band split in 1970, becoming an actor (*The Magic Christian, 200 Motels, Caveman,* etc), a director (*Born To Boogie,* a documentary about T. Rex) and racking up a string of hit singles, beginning with the self-penned "It Don't Come Easy" in 1971. And yet as the second half of his solo career began, he found that his audience had gone from buying rock and roll records to investing in stocks and bonds. What followed was a decade of recording material that, for the most part, nobody heard, that included overcoming an alcohol problem, and, during one of its lighter stretches, saw him appear as a regular on the children's television program *Shining Time Station* (in the role of 'Mr. Conductor,' since inherited by comedian George Carlin). He became, to put it bluntly, a 'journeyman' rather than a 'star,' a musician whose biggest success during this period was a 1989 tour with a band of "All-Starrs" including Joe Walsh, Billy Preston, Clarence Clemens, Nils Lofgren, Levon Helm, Rick Danko, Jim Keltner and Dr. John. For all intents and purposes a series of oldies shows, with Starr drumming a little and singing a handful of classic Beatle and solo tunes, the whole sha-bang was documented on 1990's *Ringo Starr And His All-Starr Band Live* (Rykodisc).

But if this day of talking to the press has been a long time coming, it's being suffered good-naturedly.

"It's going good. It's going really well, you know?" he says, when asked how he's holding up. "We've got a record coming out, *Time Takes Time*, and this is what you have to do."

Recorded over the last year in Los Angeles, with tracks produced by Don Was, Phil Ramone, Jeff Lynne and Peter Asher, *Time Takes Time* (Private Music) features a thoroughly contemporary approach to music making, one that acknowledges the best melodic guitar rock of the 1960's, without Starr getting trapped in the nostalgia bag.

True, a track like "I Don't Believe You" would be just as at home on *Beatles 65*, and "Weight Of The World," the first single to be released from the album, is downright Byrdsian, but the overall impression the album makes (aside from inspiring you to tap your foot and rock your head from side to side) is that it was made by an artist ready to embrace his future rather than his past. In large part this is due to the material Starr himself wrote for the album, including "Don't Go Where The Road Don't Go" (a song inspired by his beating the bottle) and the socially significant "Runaways."

Due in stores on May 22, it is quite possibly the finest album he's played on in over two decades. Concert dates, announced at a press conference at Radio City Music Hall in early April, include performances at the Music Hall on June 19 and 20, and at The Jones Beach Theater on June 23. This year's installment of the All-Starr band features Todd Rundgren, Dave Edmunds, Joe Walsh, Timothy B. Schmit, Nils Lofgren, Tim Cappello, Burton Cummings and Ringo's son, Zak Starkey.

So what is it like speaking with Ringo Starr? It sends big ripples through your cool. This is, after all, the man who coined the phrase "A Hard Day's Night," and was the featured vocalist, " ,..the one and only Billy Shears," on the Beatles' epic *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Despite my being a tremendous fan of the new album, I told myself I wasn't going to gush over it. Yet just minutes after we start talking, I'm telling him how great I think *Time Takes Time* is, emphasizing every word. I then apologize, saying, "I'm sure everybody is telling you that today... " "But I love to hear it," he says. Then the questions start to roll.

It's been nine years since your last studio album. Why did you stop recording — had you lost your passion for doing it?

Yeah. It ended in '84 — well not quite ended — but it started [to end] in 1984, [when] I did an album called *Old Wave*, which Joe Walsh produced. It only came out in Germany and Canada, which was a little disappointing. And then I did another album in Memphis, with Chips Moman, which only came out in a court of law — and that was really disappointing. So I felt, "What am I doing this for?" After that, we put a few repackages together, one with Rhino, and one with Rykodisc, and I just sort of ended up leaving the business. But it's not, it hasn't been nine years — it sounds like nine years I've been dead, but that's not strictly true [laughs], because in '89 we were actually on the road with the first All-Starrs, then in '90 the live album came out, and last year I was making this new album, *Time Takes Time*. So it's not like, from then to now. There have been a few bits and bobs going down [laughs]. But a lot of people are saying,"Well, it's been nine years, hasn't it?" Like I'm Rip Van Winkle and they just woke me up.

At the Press conference at Radio City Music Hall, you mentioned that the strain you felt at the beginning of recording this album was pretty terrifying. Could you elaborate on that?

Well it was just being back in the studio and being sober. You have to learn how to live again. It's been three and a half years for me, but it was only two years when we went into [the studio] last February, and, you know, you just have to get used to it again. So I went in for a week with Jeff Lynne, and then I had to go on holiday for a week, because I was just too tense, and it wasn't fun, and no one understood me — these are all things that I was building up in my brain. And I went to Baja, California and sat on the beach and meditated for a week, came back, and then it was OK. I'd put it all in perspective, and I know what to do, and it was OK from then on. I had no trouble after that. But, yes, the first week was pretty strange.

Would you say that you had "Butterflies in the stomach" as you were making this record?

No. I can't say Butterflies. I mean, when you listen to some of the tracks you say, "Oh God, that's great." When

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RINGO STARR & HIS ALL STARR BAND

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: TIM CAPPELLO, TODD RUNDGREN, NILS LOFGREN, RINGO STARR, DAVE EDMUNDS, TIMOTHY B. SCHMIT, JOE WALSH, BURTON CUMMINGS. (ABSENT: ZAK STARKEY)

you're playing with other musicians and it really works, you get a thrill. I wouldn't say "Butterflies," that's like a nervous thing. I get Butterflies before I go onstage — actually they're huge moths [laughs].

At the same press conference you also joked about the changes that have occurred in studio technology...

Yeah, well, it's moved on, I must tell you...

Is there anything that you've always hated about recording that you wish had changed, but hadn't?

I wish you didn't have to go down the wires. The drums sound so good in the studio, and then it goes down all those wires and out the console and out the speakers, and that's where you spend time, you know? Trying to get it to sound live and real. I think it's more of a drum problem than a guitar problem or a piano problem. [Drums] are just so basic, you know?

Right. Now, speaking of guitars, one can't help but notice how important a role they play on Time Takes Time...

It's a guitar-y album...

As a drummer, how do you feel about this?

I love it. It's sort of my year to be into guitars, so the guitars are very up-front on the album, and also the band is very guitar-ish. It's just the way I feel right now.

Was becoming a songwriter again a slow process?

It *was* very slow because I just had lost the ability to write. I sort of lost the ability to play and write. So it was really thrilling when Johnny Warman, a friend of mine, and I were just, you know, sitting around one day with guitars and it all started to flow. And [then], because I was making an album, we just sort of directed the songs where I wanted to take them... *That* is really thrilling, when you've got your little demo with just you and the guitar on it, and then it ends up as the record. That process, especially when you get to the end of it, is just fabulous.

When the songs did finally start to flow again, did you feel you were starting all over again, from the point you might've been at as a writer, say, a dozen years ago?

No. I think it's an actual quantum leap from the way I wrote to the way I'm writing now, with the things I have to say these days.

You write both words and music...

All together. The melody, the chords and the lyrics. It all has to come as one for me. I'd like to try the other way. I keep hearing about these guys that just sort of go in and lay down a lot of riffs and then write the words later. So that's something to look forward to in the future. I play three chords on the guitar — I've got a guitar for each chord — and I play three chords on the piano, and that's how I've always written. Plus we had Johnny [Warman] playing guitar and he can play a lot more than I can. So that's how we did it this time; he actually played the guitar.

These songs are a lot more autobiographical than the ones you've done in the past...

Sure.

Is that because you're more comfortable writing that kind of material now?

Well, it's just the space I'm in right now, you know? "Don't Go Where The Road Don't Go" is the Just Say No song. Really that's just my version of it. Because I'm saying "No" now, I want everyone in the world to say "No." "After All These Years," you know, I've been on the road for 25 years too. It was actually written for another band, but the song still holds up and it relates to me. And "Runaways" was really about all those kids who run to New York and LA, and London, Paris and Rome. It's pretty rough out there, and it's mainly based on a program I watched about parents trying to find [their runaway kids]. I'm telling everybody that I'd like all the kids just to phone home to say they're alive; they don't have to go home, just phone home, because it was just devastating to see these parents. It was the other side of the coin — we keep hearing about the kids — but the other side of the coin was to see these parents searching a major city. It's pretty incredible to think you'd ever find them. Then I thought, "I have five children here"; I mean, I would just be totally devastated if one of them — it would be OK if they left home, because we all have our ups and downs — but not to know if they were alive or dead is too freaky for me.

I was going to ask you about "Runaways," not only in regards to its theme, but because I can almost hear someone who's not Ringo Starr doing it. It might be a real good track for someone like Ric Ocasek, you know what I mean?

We had one little controversy with the record company and that was this song. They felt it wasn't "Me," and I said, "But it is 'Me.'" [Laughs] "This is me; I wrote it and I want it." And I think Phil Ramone did such a great job on it. It has a really good mood to it. There are still a lot of people who want "Happy-go-Lucky Ringo." They want "Yellow Submarine"...

And "Step Lightly" [from 1974's Ringo *Lp]...*

"Step Lightly" and all that stuff. "It Don't Come Easy." But I'm afraid we're changing.

Did you find, when going through the demos, that a lot of people were still trying to write you another "Yellow Submarine"?

Yes, but we didn't use them, of course. Another problem

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"A LOT OF PEOPLE ARE SAYING, 'WELL, IT'S BEEN NINE YEARS, HASN'T IT?' LIKE I'M RIP VAN WINKLE AND THEY JUST WOKE ME UP."

we had was that people sent in a lot of real "teenage" songs. There was one song about this seventeen-year-old girl [laughs], and I just couldn't do it, I felt like a lecher. I was like, "I can't do *that* anymore."

At what point did you start looking to outside writers for material?

As soon as we decided that we were going to make an album. Of course I was writing stuff anyway, so we would attempt them at least. Then we started searching for songs. In fact, the first song that we recorded with Jeff Lynne was "Don't Be Cruel," [laughs] the Elvis song; but you know, we did fifteen tracks and it's not one of the 10 that made the album, though it is going to be on the CD-5 format. So the things that aren't out now, it's not that they weren't great, it's just that you have to pick your best shot for the album. The rest will start sneaking out on this and that, B-sides and stuff.

Were you familiar with the writers of the first single, "Weight of the World," or was that one you picked out of the pile of demos?

No, that was one you pick out of the pile. You get a lot of stuff submitted once they know that you're recording, but, I mean, some of it is just impossible; you're wasting your time listening to a lot of it, but you have to, to find the good ones. Because you never can tell. And also, you listen to stuff that sounds like absolutely nothing on the demo, and you know you can make something of it. So it's a whole process that goes down. And then of course, besides the ones I'd written that I wanted to do, besides the songs by others that I wanted to do, besides the ones the record company had put forward, after we'd chosen those, then the producers all had their say. Peter Asher brought "Golden Blunders." Don Was, though it was written with me in mind by Jellyfish, brought "I Don't Believe You." He sort of put that one together. It's a combination of everybody's talent. I'd like to sit here and say, "I did it all." But, in fact, you do get a lot of help.

A lot of really great musicians appear on this album, people like Tom Petty, Brian Wilson, Benmont Tench, Jim Horn...

They were great, particularly because everybody knew how to play [laughs]...

...what was the atmosphere like in the studio? When you're playing with people with those kind of chops, do you consciously try to egg each other on, is there a kind of friendly competition that begins to happen?

No, there's no competition. That's the beauty of it. We were all working for each other. I never felt, with any of the sets of musicians [that appear on the album], that there was competition. We were all doing our best. You know, you're playing, and nobody wants to let anybody else down.

Another nice aspect of the album are those little bits, like when you say, "Thanks guys," at the end of "Don't Know A Thing About Love."

They're just on because we were doing the hand claps at the end of the track, there was Doug Fieger and Jellyfish and Don, and, I don't know, after we were doing the hand claps I just stepped over to the mic and said, "Thanks Lads." [Laughs] That's what makes it a personal Ringo album, when you hear little asides like that.

Like at the end of the "You and Me" on the Ringo *album, where you start talking and continue to do so until the album fades to a conclusion...*

Sure. I just can't keep my mouth shut, that's the problem [Laughs]. Mr. Blather, they should call me.

Are you always going to work with "name" musicians, or would someday like to get your own band together?

That's something I'd really like in the future. I don't know if it'll be the next one, but somewhere down the line I'd like to make an album with one group of musicians, all the way through, and then I'd like to take that group on the road.

RINGO IN THE STUDIO WITH DON WAS

That's where I came in, being in a band. But right now, we're doing it this way.

I'm very interested in Brian Wilson's work on this album. This is the first time a "Beach Boy" and "Beatle" have worked together, isn't it?

The big "Bs."

Right, the big "Bs"...

Well, we didn't actually work together; I was in Europe when he worked, but he is on the same record. I've seen Brian several times over the last year and we say "Hi," mutual respect, but we have a lot of other stuff we can talk about, besides that. "Oh Hi, how are you today, [laughs] Mr. Beach Boy?" And he says, "How are you, Mr. Beatle?" We don't deal with life like that.

You've said that this album is the time to stretch. Can you give me a few concrete examples?

The "Runaway" track is the stretch, I think. I think it's a stronger direction for me, like we were talking about before, though there are [still] a lot of love songs and things like "Weight of the World." I just feel that it's a new direction. I don't think I've done an album like this before. It's more of going in a new direction than a stretch.

This time out you worked with a group of producers, whereas in the past there was always one central figure in the control room, be it George Martin, Richard Perry...

Sure, Arif Mardin...

What do you, as an artist, need from a producer that's different from what you needed in the past?

I always need the producer to hold it together, because I'm behind the kit. In doing the tracks, I want to be a musician. That's all I really want to be. So he'll make sure that everyone's cool and everyone's in tune — and that we're playing it the way that we decided. I don't want to be playing drums and wielding the whip. That's up to him. Not that we had a very big whip on this album. It was a very little whip [laughs]. And also I need to trust... that we're both going in the same direction. And I want to feel comfortable when it comes down to the vocals.

How are the tour rehearsals shaping up at this point?

They're not shaping up at all; we don't rehearse until the 12th of May. Everybody's busy — Todd's getting ready to go to Japan for awhile. The others are either playing somewhere or finishing an album. Nils is up north finishing his next album. So everyone is doing whatever they do until the 12th, and then we'll all meet up and put it together.

Before we wrap this up I want to ask you about corporate sponsorship and it's relationship to rock and roll. You're upcoming tour is being sponsored by...

Alberto VO5

...and I'm very interested in what you think about corporations being involved with the music on that level, particularly in light of the controversy that erupted a few years ago regarding the use of Beatles' songs in television commercials.

Well, the first Beatle song that was used in a commercial we had pulled off [the air] because none of the Beatles were involved in that decision. The one that's out now is a Yoko Ono decision.

So you feel good about corporate sponsorship in general...

Oh sure. I do. I know some artists out there are totally against it, but I'm not. I think it helps the music business, it allows us to put on opening acts, it allows us a lot more freedom.

How would you like to see your career unfold from here on out?

Well, I think it's unfolding in a fabulous direction, and in the direction I want it to go. It's the record, it's the tour, it's being back as a musician. I'm really focused on the music business right now and not sort of getting diffused with TV and film. That might be in the future, but right now it's just going absolutely the way I want it to go.